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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003126

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CODEL LAHOOD MEETS WITH MP SAAD AL-HARIRI

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (U) Calling on Mustaqbal ("Future") Party leader and MP Saad al-Hariri in his Qureitem mansion, CODEL Lahood repeatedly expressed its support for Lebanon and solicited Hariri's suggestions for their upcoming meeting with Israeli PM Olmert and for action upon their return to the US. Congressman Lahood noted the CODEL had toured war-damaged areas, met the Prime Minister, and would lay a wreath on Rafiq al-Hariri's grave; he asked how the delegation could help Lebanon's democracy and economy. Congressman Reyes noted the stark contrast between the state of Lebanon when he visited a year prior, at which time Lebanon had rebuilt impressively and the big issue was the economic reform program. Congressman Boustany reiterated his support for Lebanon, expressed concern over the continuing arms smuggling, and asked for suggestions as to how the delegation could convince Israel to lift the blockade. End summary.

WAR DAMAGE

2. (C) CODEL Lahood, consisting of Congressmen Ray Lahood, Charles Boustany and Silvestre Reyes, visited MP and Mustaqbal ("Future") Party Leader Saad Hariri in his Qureitem mansion. Hariri shared his thoughts on Lebanon's position nearly three weeks after the cessation of hostilities. Hariri suggested that the war had "put Lebanon back on the radar screen" and offered an opportunity to build "a better democracy and a better Lebanon. If we implement resolution 1701 fully and with dedication," Hariri continued, "there is a big opportunity to move forward. As the leader of the Future Party, I'm committed to implement 1701." There is now an opportunity to take Lebanon out of the regional context in which it has been the battleground of its neighbors. Lebanon is the only moderate democracy in the Middle East, he said. "We're the model -- not the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example."

3. (C) The war had, however, had a huge impact on Lebanon and its people. Israel's targeting was incomprehensible, according to Hariri. Over 125,000 buildings had been affected, out of which 20,000 were completely destroyed, 40,000 heavily damaged, 30,000 partially damaged, and the rest slightly damaged. Lebanon's important tourism sector was decimated, and there is a continuing degradation of

Lebanon's economy due to the blockade. Congressman Lahood noted the CODEL had toured war-damaged areas, met the Prime Minister and would lay a wreath on Rafiq al-Hariri's grave.

BLOCKADE

14. (SBU) While the security concerns that are cited as justification for the blockade do exist, Hariri continued, the main problem is Syria. Lebanon is being punished even though Syria is the source of the arms smuggling to Hizballah. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are doing what they can, but are short of crucial equipment. Lebanon doesn't ask for or need Patriot missiles, F-15's, F-16's, or Apache helicopters, Hariri said, but it does need light weapons and some helicopters to impose its authority on the entirety of Lebanon's territory.

15. (C) The blockade is undermining the government and its anti-smuggling efforts, Hariri said. Israel has learned nothing from its treatment of Palestinian leaders Yasser Arafat and Abu Mazen, he added. Its sanctions on them produced and then strengthened Hamas, and its sanctions on Lebanon are strengthening Hizballah, he said. This war has nothing to do with Lebanon, he continued. It is an Iranian war on Israel. Still, we have told Hizballah that it must act Lebanese; no one will sit back and allow them to do "these things" again.

STRENGTHENING AND DEPLOYING THE LAF

16. (C) Prompted for specific recommendations, Hariri said

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that the focus should be on assisting the LAF and ISF. The Lebanese security services can't perform if they don't have teeth. While some international observers are afraid that assistance to the LAF will end up in Hizballah's hands, that couldn't happen, Hariri asserted. There is no love between the security services and Hizballah, Hariri asserted, and noted that the LAF had refused to use force against the March 14, 2005 demonstrators, despite the orders of the Syrians and the Lebanese leaders they controlled. The LAF has begun seizing weapons effectively, and the more the US helps the LAF the better they will perform.

17. (C) The simple fact of the LAF's deployment to the south of Lebanon is the biggest defeat for Hizballah, Hariri continued. They can't fire missiles at Israel any more -- even the Shi'a inhabitants of the south would turn on them. People have now begun to realize that Hizballah is responsible for ruining their lives. If the army can reestablish its presence and sovereignty, they will realize that the GOL is the solution to their problems, not Hizballah, and that Hizballah is just an agent of Iran. Those who opposed Hizballah before will now be freer to oppose them, and may begin to counter some of their activities such as stealing and diverting electricity. When Congressman Lahood sounded encouragement that people in the south are becoming disenchanted with Hizballah, Hariri predicted "you will hear more and more of this."

ARMS SMUGGLING

18. (C) Congressman Boustany cited the potential for continuing arms smuggling and asked how Hariri would use his parliamentary position and clout to achieve a solution. Hariri frankly admitted that he would not take the lead on this issue in the Parliament or in public. To do so, he asserted, would be to invite civil unrest and a potential "bloodbath" because of his own relatively narrow support in Lebanon. Right now, he continued, "Hizballah is on the ground. I don't want to kick him in the stomach. I want to take his weapon away and tell him he must become Lebanese."

PM Siniora, however, is now in a strong enough position in the political and public eyes to take steps against Hizballah without suffering retaliation.

¶9. (C) Additionally, Speaker Berri has "changed colors" and lined up behind the GOL. As a Shi'a leader, he and his Amal movement can counter Hizballah's claim to protect Shi'a interests -- when it is really protecting Iran. Even if Iran pays \$20,000 or \$30,000 to someone who has spent his life building a house that was destroyed, he won't forgive Hizballah. Hariri concluded, "So now it is a delicate situation, but if everyone plays their role it won't take long" to put Hizballah in its place.

¶10. (C) Still, only with international help can Lebanon contain and defeat Hizballah's arms smuggling, Hariri said. Iran has been financing Hizballah with \$7-8 billion over the past several years and the international community did nothing. Syria left Lebanon only because of the combination of Lebanese protesters in Martyr's Square and US pressure and warnings to Damascus. The LAF desperately needs equipment, and can't even communicate among its units. Recognizing the importance of showing progress, though, Hariri added "I will talk to them and there will be more transparency on this issue."

SOLUTIONS AND FOLLOWUP

¶11. (C) "If you want to give the coup de grace to Hizballah," Hariri continued, "do something on the Shebaa Farms. But do it for the government, not for Hizballah. Make it a victory for diplomacy. And also, implement the Armistice."

¶12. (C) Congressman Boustany asked whether it would be a loss of face for Lebanon to allow international forces to deploy along the Syrian border. Hariri responded that as long as the Israelis are in the country it would be politically impossible, but that the idea could be looked at later. Still, ultimately, a country can not "subcontract" its border control -- even to the German technical assistance teams

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which have been planned for Lebanon.

¶13. (C) Reacting to Hariri's praise for Lebanon's democracy, Congressman Lahood cited his deep disappointment with the Parliament's vote to extend the mandate of President Emile Lahoud. He also noted that the day after the September 11, 2001 attacks the US Congress met in session and invited the President to address the Congress, and that the President did so just five days after the attacks. Why had Lebanon's Parliament not met since well before the recent conflict with Israel? Hariri protested that Lahoud's mandate was extended under threat from Syria, and that the Parliament sit-in organized by Speaker Berri is among other things a protest against Lahoud's refusal to call an extraordinary session of Parliament.

¶14. (C) Congressman Reyes asked whether Hariri could press Hizballah to return the two kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Hariri predicted, "the soldiers won't die. Hizballah won't make a stupid mistake. But I'm focused on disarmament."

¶15. (U) Reyes, Lahood and Boustany reiterated their support for Lebanon and their determination to bring the issues of the blockade, Lebanon's anti-smuggling efforts, and its suffering to PM Olmert during their visit to Israel the following day. The three Congressmen then addressed the local and Arab press in Hariri's Qureitem foyer before leaving.

¶16. (U) This cable has not been cleared by the CODEL.
FELTMAN